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Obituaries

Joe Jackson, who received Medal of Honor for rescuing three men in Vietnam, dies at 95

By Matt Schudel
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Joe M. Jackson had been flying military airplanes for a quarter-century and was in his third war when he was touched by glory. He had enlisted in the old Army Air Corps before World War II, had flown jet fighters during the Korean War and was among the first pilots of U-2 spy planes in the 1950s.

In 1968, he was a 45-year-old Air Force lieutenant colonel flying transport planes in Vietnam. After landing his C-123 at an overrun military camp, braving mortar shells and weathering crossfire to rescue three stranded servicemen, Col. Jackson became one of only 14 members of the Air Force to receive the Medal of Honor for their actions in the Vietnam War.

He was 95 when he died Jan. 12 at a Veterans Affairs facility in Seattle. His death was confirmed by his daughter, Bonnie Jackson, who said there was no specific cause.

Col. Jackson enlisted in the Air Corps (later called the Army Air Forces before the Air Force became an independent branch of the military in 1947) intending to be an airplane mechanic. During a training flight, he put out a fire in an engine, saving the aircraft and the crew.

His calmness under pressure received the supreme test on May 12, 1968, when a U.S. Special Forces camp at Kham Duc, South Vietnam, was assaulted by North Vietnamese soldiers. Eight aircraft, including helicopters and airplanes, had crashed or been destroyed on the ground. One plane blocked the runway, leaving only 2,200 feet of the 4,000-foot airstrip usable.

Over a two-day period, about 1,000 U.S. service members, Vietnamese allies and civilians were airlifted from the camp, which was surrounded by mountains. One cargo plane, carrying about 150 South Vietnamese civilians, was shot down, killing everyone on board.

When the evacuation appeared to be complete, orders were issued to bomb the camp and demolish anything left behind.

“Negative, negative!” a pilot shouted over his radio. Three members of an Air Force team assisting with the evacuation were not accounted for.

Col. Jackson, circling at an altitude of 9,000 feet, watched as another C-123 landed on the airstrip below, coming under constant fire from machine guns and mortars. As the pilot turned around, the three men on the

ground scrambled toward the airplane, but they were too late. The C-123 was airborne and did not have enough fuel to return.

Col. Jackson and his crew of four took over the rescue effort as the last hope for the three airmen stranded at Kham Duc.

“We’re going in,” he said, as he pitched his unarmed C-123 into a near-vertical descent, to reduce exposure to enemy fire.

Maneuvering his cumbersome aircraft through a 270-degree roll as if it were a nimble fighter plane, Col. Jackson leveled out just above the trees and landed on the first 100 feet of the runway, by then engulfed in smoke from burning fuel tanks.

He slammed on the brakes, with the tires screeching as the plane skidded down the runway pockmarked by mortar shells.

“I told the guys I’m not going to reverse the propellers, because to do that would shut down the auxiliary jet engines,” he said. “And I didn’t want to take time to restart them. I said, ‘We’re not going to be on the ground very long.’ ”

He came to a stop near where the three members of the combat control team were hiding in a ditch.

“It didn’t seem like there was any possible way for a plane to get in,” Jim Lundie, one of the three rescued servicemen, later said. “The whole camp was burning and exploding. When I looked up and saw that C-123 coming in, it was like a miracle. I couldn’t believe it.”

The three airmen jumped on board as bullets ricocheted off the runway and under the belly of the airplane. A rocket headed for the cockpit, falling short and landing “immediately in front of the nose wheel of the airplane,” Col. Jackson said in a Library of Congress oral history interview. It failed to explode.

Turning the plane around, he roared back down the runway in the opposite direction, taking off at the steepest angle he could.

“I say that we were on the ground somewhere around 40 to 50 seconds,” he later recalled.

“As I was taking off, automatic weapons and small-arms fire was directly in front of me and probably behind me as well, from both sides of the runway,” he said. “The spot where we were parked, that spot erupted with mortar fire.”

A C-130 that landed earlier in the day at Kham Duc returned to its base riddled with more than 85 bullet and shrapnel holes in the fuselage. Col. Jackson’s “survived the approach, landing, turnaround, and departure without receiving a single hit,” wrote his commanding officer in a letter nominating him for the Medal of Honor.

President Lyndon B. Johnson presented the medal to Col. Jackson and three other service members at a White House ceremony on Jan. 16, 1969.

Joe Madison Jackson was born March 14, 1923, in Heard County, Ga., the youngest of seven sons. His father was a farmer and teacher.

After high school in Newnan, Ga., Col. Jackson enlisted in the Army Air Corps. (Another Newnan resident, Marine helicopter pilot Stephen W. Pless, also received the Medal of Honor the same day as Col. Jackson.)

During World War II, Col. Jackson served mostly as a gunnery instructor in the United States. He flew 107 missions as an F-84 fighter pilot in the Korean War and later became one of the first pilots of the Air Force's U-2 spy planes. During the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, he helped direct aerial reconnaissance over the island.

He graduated from what is now the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and then he received a master's degree in political science in 1963 from George Washington University.

After 298 combat missions in Vietnam, Col. Jackson served at the Pentagon and at the Air Force's Air War College in Alabama. He retired in 1974 as a full colonel.

He later worked with Boeing, the aircraft manufacturer, and helped train members of the Iranian air force. He settled in Kent, Wash.

Survivors include his wife of 74 years, the former Rosamund Parmentier of Kent, Wash.; two children, Bonnie Jackson of Kent and David Jackson of Dallas; a granddaughter; and a great-granddaughter.

While Col. Jackson's plane was on the ground at Kham Duc, a reconnaissance aircraft snapped what is believed to be the first photograph of a military action that resulted in the Medal of Honor.

"You know, people have asked me, 'Why did you do such a thing?' " Col. Jackson told Larry Smith, author of "Beyond Glory: Medal of Honor Heroes in Their Own Words."

"My answer is, 'It was the right thing to do' . . . The mission was to get the three guys, and we got out of there okay, and I'm happy. That was the limit of my thinking.

"If you start thinking about medals, you're gonna lose your shirt."

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Matt Schudel has been an obituary writer at The Washington Post since 2004. He previously worked for publications in Washington, New York, North Carolina and Florida. Follow

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